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The Role of Community Groups in Supporting Women with Maternal Distress

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Background

Mild to moderate Perinatal Mental Health Problems (PMHP) are common with up to 30 percent of women affected¹. PMHP have an adverse effect on women, children and families². Despite the seriousness of PMHP women often fail to access help from mainstream services. Women report feeling “judged”, believe GPs and midwives are “out of their depth” with mental health issues, and are dissatisfied with the treatment options available to them. Women often believe disclosure of PMHP will result in removal of their child³. Women’s community groups often provide an alternative service that may be more acceptable for women with mild to moderate PMHP’s.

Aims

To explore the support provided by community groups to those women experiencing mild to moderate PMHP.

Research Governance

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from Middlesex University Ethics Committee.

Methods

A mapping exercise, to identify those community groups believed to support women with maternal distress, was conducted. Over 150 community groups (North London) were identified that might support women or have relevant or related knowledge to PMHP. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders from 11 groups to explore the main issues facing women who do need reaching out to, the aims of their organisation and the services they provided to women.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using inductive and deductive thematic analysis. The data were explored using a framework of themes, identified from the literature, on women’s experience of PMH care. Data were also explored to identify the “gaps” filled by community groups in relation to mainstream services, in the care of women with mild to moderate PMHP.

Findings

Pregnant women and new mothers who, access community groups in North London, often have a number of complex and interdependent needs which render them particularly vulnerable to PMHP. Community groups offer a “niche” service to women based on their cultural background, religious beliefs, immigration and health status and socio-economic background. Community groups offer women an intimate and personalised service based on support, trust and respect. Community groups were believed to provide a service to vulnerable women experiencing emotional and mental distress, not provided by mainstream services.

Implications for practice

This small project aimed to understand the support provided by community support groups in the provision of care to women with mild to moderate PMHP. The ethos of community groups differ fundamentally from those of mainstream services. Community groups are believed to be essential in “filling the gaps” in NHS maternity care especially regarding care of women with complex and interdependent needs.

References

1. O’Keane, VM and Marsh, S (2007) Pregnancy plus: depression during pregnancy. *British Medical Journal*.334, 1003-1005.
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3. Jarrett, P (2016) Pregnant women’s experience of depression care. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice*.11 (1),Available <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/JMHEP-05-2015-0023> (Accessed 23rd February 2016).

Ethos of Women’s Community Groups

Women do need reaching out to.

We listen, we really, really listen.

We take them as we find them.

Talking to them, giving of yourself.

We know what it is like – women respond to that.

Somebody there for them, not paid, but (special).

Suggested improvements to mainstream services

“Mainstream services don’t work for vulnerable women”

“Need service culturally sensitive to needs”

“Heart-sink patient – GPs heart sinks when he sees them coming through the door”

“GPs don’t explain and don’t understand the complexity of the problems women present with”

“PND is the result of complex needs and complex problems”

“People who are most needy don’t access the services they need”

“Children Centres are intimidating, middle class environment, they tend to shy away from them...”